

# FARMER INSIGHT 2013

Highlights of Research Conducted with Organic Farmers



In the early months of 2013, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with sixteen organic farmers across the country, to get a snapshot of what they are seeing, from different vantage points. The farmers we talked to came from all across the spectrum, with diverse political philosophies, ethnic, educational, religious and cultural backgrounds. There were eleven men and five women, ranging in age from under 30 to over 70. What they share is a passionate commitment to organic farming. Taken together, they offer a picture of what it is like to be an organic farmer in the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: what is important to them, what they worry about, where they see their future, and what gets them out of bed and into their fields every morning.

Following are some key themes that emerged from our interviews:

**Organic farmers come from a mix of backgrounds: some are relatively new, while others are part of a time-honored tradition.**

- ▶ The majority of these farmers were relative newcomers, having had their farms for fewer than 12 years. At the other end of the continuum, six have either been organic farmers for most of their adult lives or are working on farms that have been in their family for multiple generations.

**These farmers feel a strong sense of purpose.**

- ▶ All feel pride in producing quality, healthful products. Nearly all also find deeper meaning in their work, and find

their farms to be a means for achieving goals as disparate as inspiring young people, rehabilitating veterans, providing food for the homeless in inner cities, enabling humane treatment of animals, demonstrating an appreciation of history, and serving as stewards for the environment.

**A number of pathways led to their decision to become organic farmers.**

- ▶ Virtually all were motivated by the desire to help others.
  - ▶ The most common motivator was the desire for more healthful food for their families or the general public.
  - ▶ Those who grew up in agricultural settings either learned sustainability from their families or saw for themselves the negative effects of chemicals and pesticides.
  - ▶ A couple were political/environmental activists concerned about worker health and humane treatment of animals.
  - ▶ Only one saw it through a business lens as a more profitable approach.

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**These farmers told us that:**

- ▶ They see increasing levels of community support for their products. Most report higher levels of mainstream acceptance of the concept of “organic” products. They see growing support for locally grown foods, which is gaining traction from the rise of local farmers markets, and stores such as Whole Foods. However, a number believe that most consumers still get their groceries from big-box retailers supplied by “big ag.”



### These farmers told us that:

- ▶ **They view organic certification as important, although they do not think it is ideally implemented.** Nearly all of these farmers see certification as important to their future success because it establishes minimum standards. However, there is awareness that certification relies on the depth of knowledge and experience of the certifier. An open question is how GMOs will be handled.
- ▶ **They regularly seek information to improve their production methods.** They are readers who see the value of researching new farming techniques, and of getting information about what's working, from multiple sources. While the internet has become a vital tool, personal contact with other farmers is most highly valued.
- ▶ **They are peer-oriented, hands-on learners.** Nearly all say they learned their trade by working side-by-side with other farmers. Universally, the need for hands-on learning through apprenticeships and internships is viewed as essential. Many feel a connection with other organic farmers, with whom they actively network and socialize.
- ▶ **They see a role for research and higher education.** A number see the value of education to provide business and scientific knowledge, and they have seen positive collaborations between university researchers and farmers. Some cited the value they have received from formal studies at universities. A number see scientific research as the key to gaining credibility for the value of organic food.
- ▶ **They would like to be more business and technologically savvy.** Most are satisfied with their level of general farming knowledge. The areas most frequently mentioned in which they would like additional training and support are how to become more successful from a business perspective, and how to apply new technologies.

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- ▶ **Most believe that a majority of federal programs are flawed.** Regardless of their political leanings, there is a nearly universal conviction that federal policy is heavily skewed in favor of large-scale agri-business, imposing unnecessary burdens and hindering the growth of organic farms. In their experience, most federal programs either do not apply to them, are too bureaucratic to be worthwhile, or are slanted to benefit big conventional and commodity agriculture. There were mixed ratings for the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Program and the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI), mostly because those interviewed were not fully aware of these programs. The single program spontaneously mentioned by several as genuinely helpful is the National Organic Certification Cost Share program. The National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was also positively cited as a source for grants.

### They passionately believe that organic farming is vital because:

- ▶ Most important by far: It is a major contributor to health and wellness.
- ▶ It helps to restore and/or protect the environment.
- ▶ It strengthens community connections (e.g., through local farmers markets).
- ▶ It creates meaningful jobs.

### Organic farmers are in it for the long haul.

When asked where they expected their operations to be in the next few years, most talked about plans to expand into new products and markets. None planned to leave organic farming for another industry. Those contemplating retirement are planning for succession and ways to continue their legacy by training new farmers who share their passion.

### Next Steps

This small sample of in-depth conversations serves as the cornerstone for a broader and more encompassing dialogue on meeting the needs of organic farmers in the next five years.



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